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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BUCHAREST 001318

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: EUROPARLIAMENTARY ELECTION: EVERYONE HAS WON AND
ALL MUST GET PRIZES

REF: BUCHAREST 1304

Classified By: Polcouns Theodore Tanoue for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In the aftermath of the November 25 Euro Parliamentary election and referendum, all major parties have tried to publicly spin the results as a victory for their side. PNL contacts said the key lesson from the election was for them: "Don't fight with Basescu." Since his opponents had avoided a head-to-head confrontation, Basescu had been reduced to shadow-boxing during the entire campaign, hence the low referendum turnout. Senior PSD contacts also evinced satisfaction, noting that the referendum showed that Basescu was not invincible. PSD legislator Hrebenciuc said there was 80 percent chance for the creation of a new cabinet within the next 10 days. PLD co-founder Stoica downplayed Basescu's role in his party's strong performance, and said that the PLD's new strategy was to establish itself as "the other Liberal party" in order to draw defectors from the PNL when the Tariceanu government finally fell. A senior Presidential Office advisor told us the election sent a mixed message--the good news for the President was that the election confirmed both the PD's new status as the preeminent party in Romania and the absolute decline in support for the PSD; the bad news was that the President's opponents in the PSD, PNL, and UDMR still outnumbered the PD and PLD combined. End Summary.

12. (C) Education Minister (PNL) Cristian Adomnitei told Polcouns 11/27 that while nearly all parties could justifiably claim some measure of victory from Sunday's EP elections, the "real losers" were President Basescu, Vadim Tudor, and Gigi Becali. Basescu's game plan had been to insert himself into the election campaign through the referendum. What Basescu didn't reckon with, said Adomnitei, was that the PNL had learned to counter Basescu's game. The lesson was: "Don't fight Basescu." Adomnitei said that the PNL's strategy of ignoring Basescu had paid off; without an opponent to spar with, Basescu's campaign became mere shadow boxing. Adomnitei acknowledged that Basescu remained a formidable asset to the PD. In rural districts where the PNL fought for every vote, the PD managed to easily win a 25 percent vote share even in places with no visible PD organization, simply because many rural voters saw it as "the king's party." He argued, however, that the failure of Gigi Becali's PNG and the poor referendum turnout signaled a sea change in Romanian politics: voters were tiring of Basescu's aggressive and divisive tactics and were looking for more "serious and constructive" leaders.

13. (C) PSD contacts similarly evinced satisfaction with the election results. PSD eminence grise Viorel Hrebenciuc told Polcouns 11/28 that the referendum demonstrated that President Basescu was "not invincible." Hrebenciuc also claimed credit for the PRM meltdown, boasting that "I invented Becali" knowing that the PNG would eventually "kill off" Vadim Tudor's PRM. He predicted "an 80 percent chance

for the creation of a new government within 10 days". Asked whether the PSD would pressure the PNL by threatening another no-confidence vote, he insisted that any PNL-PSD coalition would be by "mutual agreement" only. When Polcouns noted that, in absolute terms, the center-right components of the old D-A alliance had won a majority of votes cast, Hrebenciuc agreed, but insisted that in Romanian politics, personalities and personality clashes always trumped ideology. Asked whether Geoana wanted a cabinet seat, Hrebenciuc responded, "he's saying no today because he wants to stay chief of the PSD..." Hrebenciuc dismissed rumors of a putsch against Geoana, arguing that Iliescu, Nastase, and Vacaroiu's influence was down to "nothing these days" and noting that younger Geoana rivals Diaconescu and Ponta were "not ready yet." Hrebenciuc also confirmed that coalition negotiations also included discussions on postponing legislative elections until March 2009.

14. (C) At an 11/28 briefing for NATO/EU embassies, PSD President Geoana asserted that Basescu had won the referendum in May, but had lost the next round "so the score is now tied 1 to 1". Geoana predicted a 50 percent chance for "business as usual" and (referring to ongoing PSD-PNL negotiations over forming a coalition cabinet) another 50 percent chance that the PSD would take a "strategic decision" to "change things" next week. Geoana said that he had "ruled out" the possibility of a rapprochement with Basescu's PD, saying that this was a "last resort" given the strong preferences of the PSD voter base. Geoana also claimed that the election had exposed new fissures between Basescu and the PD, as the President had thrown his support to the PLD, which was now his "new favorite" party. Interestingly, during a long digression on foreign policy issues, Geoana in response to a query from an EU Ambassador stated that Romania would not

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withdraw from its Alliance commitments in Afghanistan and the western Balkans, but was already "phasing out naturally" from Iraq. Geoana said that it was the PSD's decision to commit troops to Iraq in the first place, and his party therefore could not say "flat out" that Romanian troops were leaving, but concluded "I will scale down Iraq, and I will do it relatively fast, but in consultations with our friends."

15. (C) PLD co-founder Valeriu Stoica evinced satisfaction with the election results, noting that no other new political party had succeeded in breaking the 5 percent electoral threshold since 1992. Asked about the role that President Basescu played in the PLD's success, Stoica responded, "he was great for one hour of one day" during a joint campaign rally in Iasi, but insisted the PLD got there on its own steam. He added that one of the factors in the PLD's success was that it emphasized its autonomy and didn't campaign as "Basescu's party." Stoica added that he was pleased that in some urban districts, the PLD managed to out-poll the PNL. Stoica told Polcouns that there had been a fundamental rethinking of the PNL's strategy in the months leading up to the EP race; up to now, it was the PLD that had been wooing the PD to form a tight alliance leading to a single party. He said the strategy now was to position the PLD as "the other Liberal party" so that when the Tariceanu government finally falls, PNL members would more readily abandon the PNL to the PLD. Stoica said the model for PLD-PD relations would be the same inter-party protocol signed between the PD-PNL in the previous D-A alliance.

16. (C) Stoica said that Basescu's referendum play had been "a mistake", noting that Basescu should have focused first on amending the referendum law (to eliminate the 50 percent plus one threshold for a "valid" referendum.) before calling the referendum, as it was clear from the outset that there was no way that Basescu would manage to obtain a turnout of over 50 percent of registered voters. A second mistake was in trying to run a campaign on an "abstract" issue such as electoral reform. The previous referendum (in May 2007) had drawn voters' attention because it was a personal battle between

Basescu and the 322 legislators who had suspended the President. Stoica concluded that Basescu's "referendum" card was now "degraded" and that the President would be loath to play that card again. Basescu would have to "be very careful" he concluded. Stoica acknowledged that with the exception of the right-extremist parties, all major parties could rightfully boast that they had done well in the election, but noted that "the battle has just started" in a grueling series of four elections. He concluded that "if you're happy with the result yesterday, you'll be a loser two years down the line..."

17. (C) Presidential Office Senior Advisor Cristian Preda was relatively somber regarding the election result, noting that there were two--somewhat conflicting--lessons to be drawn from the election and referendum. The first lesson was good news for the PD, as the election confirmed the PD's new status as Romania's preeminent party, and the absolute decline in support for the left to around 22 percent of the electorate. The second lesson, he said, was less welcome, as the election results showed that any PSD/PNL/UDMR formation still received more votes than the PD and PLD combined. Preda noted, however, that while a more formal PSD/PNL/UDMR alliance was the "rational scenario", Romania was by no stretch a "rational country" and existing divisions--especially within the PSD--still gave room to maneuver for Basescu's side. Preda was blunt in describing the referendum as a failure, adding that it underscored that referenda could not be used as an "instrument of governance" at least until the referendum law as revised.

18. (C) PD Vice President Romeo Raicu was similarly downbeat regarding the referendum, remarking that the PD would likely have done better overall in the EP contest had there been no referendum. Raicu was openly bitter about the PLD's strong performance, accusing the PLD of stealing votes from the PD and likening the PLD to "the bird that sits on the crocodile's back." He said that in the days leading up to the failed no-confidence vote October 3, the PD had offered to go into coalition with the PSD, including a fifty-fifty split of cabinet seats. Raicu confirmed, however, that the PD had not renewed its offer despite the ongoing PSD-PLD negotiations over forming a coalition. Rather, he said, the PD would be to go on the "attack" by going into "deep opposition" to the incumbent government in coming weeks.

19. (C) Comment: Sunday's vote continues to resonate, but the relatively good showing of both the PNL and PSD are likely to militate against any abrupt senior leadership changes in either party. The fact that both these parties surpassed

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(relatively modest) expectations, however, is also likely to make for hard bargaining between the two sides in any discussions on forming a coalition government, as the election gave neither side a whip hand. There is agreement that the election was somewhat of a failure on Basescu's part. We were somewhat surprised at the blunt admission from at least one senior Presidential Advisor that this was the case, and that Basescu was unlikely to try to resort to the referendum card so readily in the future. Many contacts stress, however, that Sunday's EP election should not be seen as a definitive test of the relative strengths of each party, as many parties are carefully husbanding resources for the four back-to-back elections scheduled to take place between now and the end of 2009. End Comment.

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